

3. 5-15-22

Sermon- How Far Can You See?

Scripture- Acts 11:1-18, CTW Ps 148

Hymns- 297, 459, 776

Theme- This was a call to do something that Peter had never done, in fact, had never imagined doing. Taking the message of Salvation in Christ to Jews in Jerusalem and Judea, sure that made sense. But to Samaria, those ethnic and spiritual half-breeds (as the Jews thought of them)? To the ends of the earth? This would mean reaching out to people so different. People, the likes of whom none of the disciples had ever met, much less, been around. This was going to be hard. This was going to have to be a Holy Spirit thing.

I. It all started when they saw Jesus for the last time. His last words to them, "And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea, and Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth." Peter was among those who heard these words, and believed them. I'm sure, though, that full impact of what these words actually meant didn't fully sink in at the time. How could they?

A. At the time, Peter didn't really think about all this. But he was thinking about it now. He had arrived in the Judean town of Joppa. And after he greeted his host, a Tanner by the name of Simon, Peter went up onto the flat roof of Simon's house to pray.

The noon day sun blanketed Peter as he prayed. I don't know what he prayed, probably something fairly ordinary. But suddenly, things got decidedly un-ordinary.

Peter tells us what happens next, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air."

The sheet, or whatever it was, was filled with all kinds of animals. Some Peter recognized as being clean and Kosher according to the Laws laid out in Leviticus 11.

However, mixed in with them were a number of **unclean animals**. Animals no moderately devout Jew would even touch, much less eat.

B. So the order following the vision came as a shock, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." What?! NO! This had to be some kind of mistake. But God would let there be no mistaking. In fact, just to make his point, **God repeated this vision two more times.**

We don't really get it, because we aren't first century Jews. But this was truly difficult for Peter.

It was a dismantling of a religious tradition, and laws that were thousands of years old. It was abandoning this pride that Peter's people had celebrated for so long, that they did things that set them apart from their neighbors.

This was an unraveling of centuries of Jewish religious thought, about what it was that included someone in the family of God.

II. I'm sure you've figured it out by now. That this whole exchange was never really about food. It was about challenging Peter, and all the Jewish followers of Christ, to redefine what it means to be part of God's family. To understand who God wanted to include as his people.

A. Of letting go of things that had served as crutches for their identity (Heritage, Laws, Rules, Traditions) and holding on to the one thing that matters. Taking steps and relying only on the Grace of God.

It took three times for the message to sink in. And what it meant for Peter, what it meant for the church was that things were going to be getting really difficult, really fast.

And this is exactly what God wanted. And it did happen fast. There came a knock at the door while Peter was still thinking about all of this. Simon the Tanner answered (I'm guessing), and shouted up to the roof.

Peter's haze was broken, probably with words like, "There are some guys from Caesarea here to see you, they said God sent them!"

They told him why they were there. Their master, a man named Cornelius, "told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'"

And so the difficulty starts. These men, these outsiders, these Gentiles stayed as Simon the Tanner's guests, in his house overnight. People in the village must have been wagging their tongues like crazy! "Can you believe the Tanner would have THOSE people stay at his house?"

B. But they hadn't seen nothing yet. The next morning Peter and 6 other Jewish Christians left with these strange Gentiles, and headed out with them to the fringes. The fringes of Judea, to the fringes of the faith (Cornelius was a good and prayerful guy, but he was a Gentile, and his family were Gentiles, and he was a Centurion in the Roman Army of all things!). And what Peter and these guys did when they got there has echoed throughout the centuries.

They ATE with them! And probably some very UN-kosher foods. I like to think they had baby-back ribs. I like picturing Peter tasting them for the first time. I have no proof, but I like to think if they walked 30 miles, they lived it up a little when they got there.

And with this simple act, suddenly, the mission became real. It was no longer an idea, or a thought, or a prayer. It was really happening. Suddenly the world opened up.

Suddenly the picture God has for mission and ministry and his people came into focus. This is what it looks like, people, very different people, around one table, together, celebrating what Christ has done with his death and resurrection for all of them.

C. This is a preview for them, and us, of Revelation 7, "where a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes,

with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

Oh yeah, something else became clear also. That this wasn't going to be easy. This wasn't going to be so clear-cut, or easy to define.

This was going to be a God thing, a faith thing, a let's-go-as-far-as-we-can-see-and-see-what-we-can-see-from-there kind of thing.

God never told them how everything would happen, or how it would all work out. But he did give them his promises, his Holy Spirit, and his Word. And that is all they needed...and for us it is the same!

And he was faithful in Caesarea, with Cornelius' household. The Holy Spirit revealed himself, he moved among them. This whole Gentile family was baptized, and the family of God grew in unexpected ways and places that day.

There was a lot to celebrate. There was a lot to be happy about. But not everyone was. Word spread fast. There were many who were really upset.

III. Change is hard. And some didn't like the changes God was proposing.

A. God was upsetting the apple cart. He wasn't going to let them just hang out with people like them. He was uprooting the hedges of Laws and Traditions that had so effectively created a boundary between "us and them."

And these people made their thoughts clear (I give them credit for that).

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." This Circumcision Group loved the old rules. In fact, they were among those who taught that those old Jewish rules were necessary for salvation!

It was a dangerous thing to add any requirement to salvation other than the blood Jesus shed on the cross. These folks loved

the old ways so much they wanted people to go backwards, to have a faith that looked more and more like the faith that God had called them away from.

It's hard to blame them for struggling. They liked having clear lines, and differences. They felt naked without those walls.

They knew deep down, that suddenly life was going to get harder, that ministry was going to get unwieldy, unpredictable, uncomfortable, chaotic.

B. I can tell you that I can relate to this group. You probably can too. I LOVE predictability! I cherish traditions, and the things I am comfortable with. I have fought tooth and nail for things that I realize God doesn't really care about.

I have dedicated myself to things that may even get in the way of God's plans. All in the name of ME, and what I like, and how I think things should be!

As a church body we fight so hard over things like Hymnals, and Worship Styles, how to celebrate events.

In our churches we complain about word choices in the bulletin, which Creed we confess, whether or not to sing "Amen" after each of the hymns, what kinds of food we serve after special services, what color the carpets are in our sanctuaries, the list can go on and on, **add your own pet peeve if I haven't mentioned it yet.**

C. This passage is clear in that here are all kinds of things that God just doesn't care about. All kinds of things that Jesus did not come into the world for.

What he **did** come for. Rather **WHO** he came for is clear though. He came into the world for all people. "Whosoever believeth".

People like you and me. He came to save us by His blood. He came to save people that don't yet know him too.

People that you know, and that I know, who don't know the MIRACLE of Joy that is knowing Christ. Knowing that they are unconditionally loved by a powerful, and yet forgiving, Holy, and yet completely merciful God.

Thank God the early church had more to it than just the circumcision people.

There were others, more in fact, that were led by the Holy Spirit, and not their desire for comfort and neatness.

Even though following the Holy Spirit meant awkwardness, discomfort, letting go of self, and holding on white knuckled as God led the way down untrodden paths, there were those who celebrated.

When Peter reported what happened they were shocked at first, just like everyone else. Change is hard and, "When they heard these things, they all fell silent." But then, "they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

IV. In Conclusion we rejoice with them. Because this is how God led his church to include people like you and me, and our ancestors.

A. Thank God that he leads people to follow him. That he gave people courage to engage in the constant battle to keep on track. That he has led people who strayed to repent, and be forgiven, and keep moving ahead with the mission.

God still calls on the church to follow him today. He still calls us to battle against complacency. He still calls us to un-comfortability, and messiness, and to love it, and to celebrate it.

Our mission is really to risk being uncomfortable in order to comfort people with the Gospel. All around us are people who have uncomfortable souls, who come from broken families, who have needs.

All around us are people who are not like us. People who have deep needs in body and soul. People who don't know Jesus. There are people here from Asia, and Mexico, and South America. There are your neighbors, who maybe you know well, and maybe you don't.

How we can reach them. How you can reach your neighbor, or co-worker, or friend with the Gospel? God may not spell it out

exactly, in fact, he probably won't. But he does call you to have faith, to trust in Him. He does call you to go as far as you can see.

B. And trust that when you get there, he'll let you see a little further from there. I don't know what doors God may open, but we need to resolve to go as far as we can see to go right now.

Maybe God is calling you to invite a friend to go to church. Maybe that's too much, and all you can do is love your friend, and ask to pray with them, or tell them you're praying for them, or have a cup of coffee with them.

Maybe all you can do is introduce yourself to someone you see all the time but haven't met.

C. Resolve to take a chance and see what God can do. You will be joining in a long line of Christians who followed where God was leading, even if they didn't know exactly where it was, or what it was going to look like. It's never been easy. It's always required a reliance upon God.

I'm not making this up, Jesus himself tells us this. In John 16 Jesus tells his disciples:

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, HE will guide you into all the truth" He goes on to talk about the reality of how difficult it will be at times: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy... I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

We will have JOY in the work God has laid out for us. We will struggle, we will weep and lament, but we will never regret it. And in fact, it is something we will celebrate for all eternity. Christ has died for our sins. He has risen from the Dead. Christ is coming back again. He did it all for you. It is a joy that can never be taken from you. It's JOY that a world wrapped in sorrow is waiting to hear.

It's time to for us take a chance.
Amen? Let Us Pray...